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Wednesday, 22 May 2013, 10.15 a.m.
New York

President:	Mr. Menan	(Togo)
Members:	Argentina	Mrs. Perceval
	Australia	Mr. Quinlan
	Azerbaijan	Mr. Mehdiyev
	China	Mr. Wang Min
	France	Mr. Araud
	Guatemala	Mr. Rosenthal
	Luxembourg	Ms. Lucas
	Morocco	Mr. Loulichki
	Pakistan	Mr. Masood Khan
	Republic of Korea	Mr. Sul Kyung-hoon
	Russian Federation	Mr. Pankin
	Rwanda	Mr. Nduhungirehe
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Sir Mark Lyall Grant
	United States of America	Ms. Rice

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian Question

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The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President (*spoke in French*): Under rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite Mr. Robert Serry, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General, to participate in this meeting.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I give the floor to Mr. Serry.

Mr. Serry: The Middle East continues to undergo a period of grave turmoil, with tragic human consequences and an uncertain outcome. We have seen regional tensions mounting dangerously as the brutal bloodshed in Syria continued while the fighting also crossed boundaries, and United Nations peacekeepers in the Golan area of separation found themselves increasingly in harm's way. Ending the conflict in Syria is a matter of great urgency and must be the top priority of the international community. At the same time, it would be mistaken and dangerous to assume that a resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is less important. Now is not the time to relent in our commitments to advancing the prospects for the resumption of meaningful talks towards the realization of a two-State solution. Now is the time for concerted action in support of a substantive initiative, lest we miss the slight opening that has been offered in recent months.

While diplomatic efforts to break the political deadlock and bring the parties back to the negotiating table have remained quiet, they are no less serious in determination. The renewed United States effort and sustained personal engagement of the United States Secretary of State is cause for encouragement. Secretary Kerry is currently on his fourth trip to the region, underscoring his commitment. We have also noted the renewed interest of regional stakeholders, particularly the important visit to Washington, D.C., on 29 April of a delegation of Arab Ministers and leaders, including the Prime Minister of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabr Al-Thani, and Secretary General of the League of Arab States Nabil El Araby. Their visit reaffirmed the importance of the Arab Peace Initiative, first proposed in 2002, and, we hope, revived prospects that its promise of regional stability can become an important part of developing peace efforts. We note, in that regard, the positive comments about the visit by President Peres and Israeli Minister of Justice and chief negotiator Tzipi Livni. We encourage the Israeli Government to respond to that opening for a revitalized Arab Peace Initiative.

The Secretary-General has also remained in close contact with the parties on the issues. In recent conversations with the two leaders, he strongly encouraged the ongoing efforts towards the resumption of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, and expressed his hope that they would soon lead to a substantial peace initiative with a defined political horizon. He further stressed the importance for the parties of creating the conditions conducive to a resumption of meaningful negotiations and avoid actions that would risk undermining such prospects.

The risk to both sides is clear. As we have said before, it is crucial that both sides reverse negative trends on the ground to restore confidence in each other and in the possibility of a solution. We take note that both parties are exercising some restraint and care not to upset the fragile situation on the ground in order to support the ongoing diplomatic effort. On the Israeli side, we have noted that there have been no new approvals or tenders issued for settlements in the West Bank or in East Jerusalem since March. However, there was a disconcerting exception, involving approximately 300 units preapproved in Beit El — a settlement deep inside the West Bank — based on a decision from last year. Settlements are illegal under international law, and Israel must abide by its commitments under the road map to freeze all settlement activity and dismantle outposts erected after 2001. We are also concerned about reports that the Israeli Government intends to legalize four West Bank settlement outposts.

Palestinians have shown countenance in diplomatic forums, and Palestinian security forces have maintained their robust performance in maintaining law and order, including in dealing with tensions on the ground. Several moments of friction illustrate the importance of both sides continuing to work responsibly to defuse tensions and avoid escalation.

Recent tensions around the sensitive issue of Jerusalem, particularly when it came to restrictions

of access to holy sites, were troubling.Clashes occurred on 7 and 8 May in and around the Old City in East Jerusalem, in the context of what Israelis call "Jerusalem Day". Restrictions on access for Palestinians were imposed in connection to visits in the esplanade of the Haram Al-Sharif/Tempie Mount — by right-wing Israeli activists. That was coupled with the temporary detention of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem for interrogation owing to reported incitement. While his detention was short, the incident added to existing friction and drew wide criticism from Palestinian, Arab and Muslim leaders. It also led to an emergency meeting of the League of Arab States in Cairo on 12 May.

Notwithstanding the increased tensions, events on the ground were relatively contained, and authorities acted with restraint. Clashes resulted in 15 Palestinian being lightly injured and 23 arrested, as well as one Israeli being injured and 13 arrested. Preceding those events, on 4 May, during Orthodox Easter, an 85-year-old Coptic Egyptian cleric and two Egyptian diplomats were held by Israeli police in the Old City while they were on their way to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Following the incident, Israel reportedly apologized to Egypt via diplomatic channels for the excessive use of force.

The Secretary-General has reiterated the importance of respect for the religious freedom of all and for worshippers of all faiths to have access to their holy sites, while noting that religious and other leaders should also refrain from inflammatory statements. We also note the statement by President Peres on 8 May that Israel, as per its agreement with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, will work to ensure the protection of the Muslim and Christian holy sites in the Old City and the safety of the worshippers. Those events once again underscore the importance of addressing the underlying issues regarding Jerusalem, which are still unresolved. It remains the view of the Secretary-General that Jerusalem — a final status issue — should emerge through negotiations as the capital of two States living side by side in peace and security, with arrangements for the holy sites that are acceptable to all.

On 15 May, Palestinians marked what they call "Al-Nakba Day" —to commemorate the 1948 events leading to their displacement — by holding large marches and festivals in urban centres across the West Bank and Gaza. In East Jerusalem, dozens of Israeli right wing extremists entered the Haram Al-Sharif/Temple Mount and clashed with Palestinians, resulting in some injuries and arrests. Overall events were relatively contained, with clashes between Palestinian protesters and Israeli forces resulting in some 50 Palestinians and six Israeli security officers being lightly injured.

Clashes between Palestinians and settlers in the occupied West Bank intensified during the reporting period. In a deplorable event, one settler was stabbed to death by a Palestinian on 30 April at the Tapuach junction, in the northern West Bank. He was the first Israeli to be killed by Palestinians in the West Bank since September 2011. The killing triggered numerous incidents of settler violence against Palestinians and their property, primarily in the Nablus governorate. Overall during the reporting period, a total of 46 Palestinians, including 12 children and one woman, were injured by settlers, while 11 settlers were injured by Palestinians. Clashes between Palestinians and settlers also resulted in extensive material damage, including to vehicles and Palestinian orchards, with some 1,400 Palestinian trees vandalized.

Israeli security forces carried out a total of 368 search-and-arrest operations in the occupied West Bank, including in Area A, resulting in 439 Palestinians being injured and 454 Palestinians being arrested. Eighteen members of Israel security forces were also injured. The large majority of the casualties resulted from clashes during Palestinian demonstrations, including against the barrier, which deviates from the Green Line in contravention of the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice (see A/ES-10/273).

The reporting period also witnessed continued demolitions of Palestinian homes and property in Area C and East Jerusalem. In total, 57 structures were demolished, leading to the displacement of 75 Palestinians, including 41 children. The ongoing demolition of homes, livelihood-related structures and essential infrastructure is of serious humanitarian concern and should stop.

The United Nations continues to monitor with concern the condition of Palestinian prisoners. Despite the release of two hunger strikers, four other Palestinians restarted their hunger strikes. Five Jordanian prisoners in Israeli jails are also reportedly on hunger strike. On 14 May, Israel renewed the administrative detention of four Palestinian Legislative Council members for another six months. We reiterate our position that the use of administrative detention must be on an exceptional basis only. Those detained must be charged

and face trial with judicial guarantees, or be released without delay. The most recent visit by families of Gaza prisoners took place on 20 May and included some 80 relatives, among them children.

Six months ago yesterday, the parties agreed to a ceasefire understanding in the Gaza Strip, which makes today a good opportunity to take stock and look ahead. The understanding brought about marked improvement during the first three months of its implementation. No rockets from Gaza landed in Israel, and there was some relaxation of remaining closures, notably the extension of the fishing limit from three to six nautical miles. However, three months of hopeful trends were followed by a reversal, as subsequent developments have threatened the improvements made. According to Israeli authorities, 33 rockets and five mortar shells landed in Israel from Gaza during the past three months. Eleven Palestinian civilians were injured in the buffer zone over the same period.

On 30 April, for the first time since 21 November 2012, an Israeli air strike killed a Palestinian, who was a militant allegedly involved in firing rockets. Starting on 21 March, the fishing limit was scaled back to three nautical miles, leading to shooting in the vicinity and arrests of Palestinian fishermen trying to go beyond the limit. Since 27 February, Kerem Shalom, the only functioning crossing for goods from Israel into Gaza, has periodically been closed for 13 days in response to rockets, resulting in shortages of some basic food stuffs and cooking gas and in losses in export cash crops.

In our view, the ceasefire understanding reached in November 2012 continues to represent the best opportunity to start changing the negative dynamics in Gaza. All must exert maximal effort to preserve the ceasefire and its basic tenets, namely, adhering to full calm and lifting the remaining closure on Gaza. We continue to support Egyptian efforts in that regard. Following the worrisome developments to which I have referred, uneasy calm has returned. Yesterday's announcement by Israeli authorities that the fishing limit had been re-extended to six nautical miles is an encouraging step.

Among the many long-term challenges facing the people of Gaza, as identified by the United Nations in our 2012 report *Gaza 2020: a liveable place?*, the lack of safe drinking water and the decline of the aquifer are perhaps the most pressing. Desalination will be necessary to improve the situation. The United Nations, with funding from Japan, has installed a desalination plant with a capacity of 50 cubic metres per hour — the thirteenth desalination plant installed by the United Nations in Gaza. That example illustrates how United Nations programming in Gaza continues apace and makes a difference.

The first phase of United Nations reconstruction projects totals approximately $450 million worth of projects approved by the Government of Israel. The United Nations continues to work in concert with other members of the international community to scale up reconstruction efforts while also pursuing the policy changes that will be required if a sustainable Gazan economy is to be re-established. We also continue to call on Israel to permit the unrestricted entry of construction material into Gaza, particularly aggregate, iron bar and cement. Restrictions on trade should also be lifted, including transfers to and from the West Bank and imports from and exports to Israel and other countries.

In a separate development, we welcome the release today of the seven Egyptian servicemen captured in the Sinai, as well as the subsequent reopening of the Rafah crossing.

On 14 May, Fatah and Hamas delegations met in Cairo to make progress on the implementation of existing reconciliation agreements. The factions reportedly recommitted to consultations on the formation of a national consensus Government, headed by President Abbas, as laid down in previous agreements. Those consultations should start within a month and lead to a Government in the next three months, after which elections, including those for the Palestinian National Council, are to take place within another 90 days. On 16 May, President Abbas visited Cairo, where he met with President Morsi to discuss Palestinian reconciliation as well as the Middle East peace process.

The Secretary-General remains deeply alarmed about the escalating violence in Syria. The humanitarian crisis continues to worsen, with every third Syrian now in need of urgent assistance. One in four have been uprooted from their homes. Syria's neighbours, as generous and hospitable as ever, are reaching their limits, now hosting more than 1.5 million registered refugees. While we recognize the impact on host countries, we stress the importance of keeping borders open for refugees fleeing violence, consistent with

international humanitarian obligations. Communities in Syria, including the Palestinian refugee population, who are among the most vulnerable, are under immense stress.

Despite the best efforts of the staff of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) to keep schools and health clinics open, often at great personal risk, half of Syria's Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA are now internally displaced. Some have fled to neighbouring countries, an estimated 54,000 to Lebanon in particular. UNRWA's emergency operation has reached many, but much more needs to be done. It is the responsibility of the warring parties to ensure the protection of the civilian population.

Amid that growing tragedy and spreading chaos, United Nations priorities are clear. We will continue to ensure that the millions of Syrians in need receive life-saving help. The Secretary-General is grateful to the donor community for its generosity, and we urge it to do even more. Humanitarian workers also need access; we must think of better and more practical ways to deliver assistance. However, humanitarian relief is not a long-term answer. That is why the Secretary-General welcomed the initiative of the United States and the Russian Federation to bring the Syrian parties to the negotiating table, and is fully devoted to helping Syrians find a political solution. The weeks ahead will be critical, and we urge everyone to cooperate.

Finally, the Secretary-General also remains gravely concerned about the allegations of the use of chemical weapons. The mission he established to investigate the claims has been doing what it can to gather and analyse the available information. Amid mounting reports on the use of chemical weapons, we once again urge the Government of Syria to allow the investigation to proceed without further delay.

Lebanon is increasingly under pressure. The war in Syria, including the unprecedented refugee crisis, is putting a growing strain on its economy, political dynamics and security. The humanitarian emergency, and its long-term implications, as well as the continuing political deadlock, require close international attention and support. The past month has seen repeated incidents of shelling from Syria into Lebanese territory that have caused casualties. On 19 May, as many as eight rockets were fired from Syria in the town of Al-Hermel, prompting President Sleiman to once more call on the parties in Syria to respect Lebanon's sovereignty and avoid military acts against Lebanese border areas. A new incursion by Syrian forces into Lebanese territory was reported around Ras Baalbek. There has also been an increasing focus on Lebanese fighters' involvement in Syria, notably from Hizbullah, in the battle between the Syrian Government and opposition forces in the town of Al-Qusayr.

President Sleiman had earlier called on all Lebanese to abide by the policy of disassociation and the Baabda declaration. The Secretary-General strongly supports President Sleiman's leadership and reiterates his call to all Lebanese to act responsibly and refrain from involvement in the conflict in Syria. Following the fighting in Al-Qusayr, violence broke out on 19 May between Sunni and Alawite neighbourhoods in Tripoli and spread to other areas of the town. At least nine people are reported to have been killed, including two members of the Lebanese security forces; more than 70 were injured. The Lebanese army has been deployed to contain the fighting.

Given the scale of the challenges facing Lebanon, it is vital that a new Government be agreed on without delay. We encourage all parties to continue to engage positively with Prime Minister-designate Salam in order to reach early agreement, which is also essential to ensure timely parliamentary elections. The consideration of arrangements for the elections due next month resumed in Parliament on 15 May. The temporary suspension of the current electoral law expired on 19 May. Now is the time to intensify efforts to agree to a way forward and avoid an institutional vacuum.

The situation in the area of operations of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon and along the Blue Line remained quiet. However, tensions were markedly increased by air strikes around Damascus on 3 and 5 May and Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace in that period. On 5 May, Lebanon lodged a complaint with the Security Council about intensified incursions by the Israeli Air Force.

On 9 May, Hizbullah, which had denied responsibility for a drone that was shot down on 25 April by the Israeli Air Force over Israeli waters, announced its readiness to receive new weaponry from Syria. It also offered support for opening a new front on the Syrian Golan, occupied by Israel since 1967. The Secretary-General has remained actively engaged

with international and regional leaders in calling on all parties to exercise maximum restraint and prevent escalation, respect the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries in the region and adhere to all the relevant Security Council resolutions.

In conclusion, the events set out in this month's briefing again attest to the mounting risks posed to regional stability. It is imperative that everyone work collectively to avert those risks, preserve stability and help to lay peaceful foundations for a better future in the Middle East, to which so many of its peoples aspire. Since the efforts being made to develop a meaningful initiative aimed at achieving a negotiated two-State solution are likely to reach a critical point in the next few weeks, we sincerely hope that this time the leaders on both sides will demonstrate their commitment and realize that this is a moment of opportunity they cannot afford to lose. That also applies to regional stakeholders, who can play an important role in achieving peace through a revitalized Arab Peace Initiative. Let me affirm that the United Nations stands ready to contribute to a return to meaningful negotiations in the period ahead, including through the Quartet and broader engagement with all parties.

The President (*spoke in French*): I thank Mr. Serry for his briefing.

I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

The meeting rose at 10.40 a.m.